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| <p>The social and psychological task of adolescence is identification. The developmental task of identification involves acquiring a sure picture of one's self by sex, by occupation, and by place in a community. Helping the offender achieve identification is accomplished through the proper use of authoritative and supportive measures designed to give the youth self-confidence, realistic help, and broader perspectives.</p> <p>Workers dealing with youthful offenders should understand the authority they have, be comfortable with it, and use it effectively. Authority elicits a response in hope of reward, a response to fear of reprisal, an automatic or conditioned response, a recognition of competence, and an identification with a person of authority. The probation officer should try to dispel the automatic fear and distrust youthful offenders have for authority. They should show that they are competent and are interested in their probationers.</p> <p>Parents are of considerable importance to the probation officer. A healthy push toward maturity can be supported by the worker who can free a young offender from the attitudes which tie him to an unhappy past.</p> |                          |                                                                                                                                   |                            |                                                                                                                                                                                |  |                                                                          |  |
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TECHNIQUES OF HELPING THE YOUTHFUL OFFENDER

by

Jane K. Ives, Ph.D.

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TRAINING CENTER IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT  
Law-Medicine Institute, Boston University  
TECHNIQUES OF HELPING THE YOUTHFUL OFFENDER

by

Jane Ives

Many young offenders live in a confused frame of mind and an unstructured environment. Their condition resembles the anomie of the schizophrenic. They are pushed to action by discomfort but the action is often destructive and serves their own needs poorly. They have no real hope of achievement and thus no real motivation for goal-directed effort. Some lack even the order of regular meals and a place of their own to sleep. Their vision of the world is narrowed by stress but has no security-giving boundaries. They want to be somebody but they don't know who. They want to do something but they don't know what. We can quite reasonably say that they are "drifters" or, in other words, they haven't found themselves.

The social and psychological task of adolescence, according to Erikson, is identification.<sup>1</sup> This is a complex task and does not end with physical maturity. Throughout life, as the individual finds himself in new situations, he must continuously make new identifications - for example, as widow, as unemployed, or as patient. Unless the individual masters the task of identification in adolescence, it can be expected that later adaptation will be unsatisfactory. The developmental task of identification involves acquiring a sure picture of one's self by sex, by occupation, by place in a community and even in the world and in history. Helping the young offender achieve identification is an appropriate treatment goal.

The rapidly changing physical state of the adolescent makes the psychological task difficult and surely the rapidly changing state of society com-

1. Erik Erickson, Childhood and Society, New York: W.W. Norton, 1950

plicates this task. In the United States the pluralistic nature of our society gives a different flavor to identification among different cultural groups.

Achieving identification in a masculine and feminine role, for example, can be quite different in a slum society than it is in the upper class. Walter Miller has described the "Female based household" in which the mother is head of the family and earns the living.<sup>2</sup> A female relative such as aunt or grandmother is the one who manages the household and cares for the children when they are small. A series of mates or fathers come and go so that the child in such a household has no opportunity to identify anyone in a fatherly social role. In the working or lower middle class there is frequently a rigidly defined division of roles between parents. Father earns the living and makes the major decisions. The mother remains in the home and cares for the children. In such a culture father never takes over the household duties and mother moves out of the home center only on rare social occasions. In the middle and upper class there seems to be greater acceptance of overlapping parental roles in which the father participates in the homemaking and child rearing responsibilities while mother often works. In order to be helpful to a young offender trying to achieve identification it is, therefore, necessary to have a clear picture of his social situation, a realistic understanding of the opportunities open to him as well as an understanding of adolescent problems in general.

Techniques of helping young offenders require the worker to maintain a nice balance of setting the security-giving limits within which the youth may safely experiment and providing the encouragement, information and direction to assure success of this experimentation.

2. Walter B. Miller, "Implications of Urban Lower Class Culture for Social Work", Social Service Review, September, 1959.

Occupational identification, for example, is a very important task in our money-oriented society. It can also contribute to achieving identification in other areas such as the sexual role, achieving independence of parents and seeing one's self as citizen. Many youthful offenders lack the skill to achieve satisfactory occupational adjustment and those who work with young offenders spend considerable time helping them to find employment. With the displacement of many laborers by automation, sexual identification primarily by occupation has become unrealistic. It has been noted for example, that in the steel industry special problems are faced by the steel worker who no longer has a place in the industry. Previously he gained considerable satisfaction because this type of work required a high degree of physical strength, ability to endure heat, and his picture of himself as a man, was enhanced by his occupational role. The retraining of such workers is complicated by their emotional response to any occupation which appears feminine. Many service occupations which have previously attracted women are now the only occupations open to the unskilled in certain areas, for example, office work, hospital jobs and certain types of restaurant work. In helping the adolescent achieve occupational identification, is it not reasonable, therefore, to discuss his idea of what constitutes a suitable occupation for a man? In this way the youth may be helped to broaden his perception and achieve some realistic success.

Many young offenders, especially those who seem most "brash" and "egotistical" actually have a very dim view of their own worth. They often see themselves as physically unattractive and their sometimes bizarre appearance and dress are a desperate effort to join the adolescent society. The wise parent is generally permissive about experimentation with manners, grooming, and dress up to a point. He permits the adolescent to experiment. Under certain circumstances where the youth's appearance may diminish his opportu-

nities, however, the parent puts his foot down. The leather jacket-dungaree dress of an adolescent boy might be permitted at home and even in school. When the youngster was about to apply for a summer job, however, the parent might well say "you must dress appropriately when you apply for this job or your chances of getting it will be small." Thus the boundaries of experimentation are set and the adolescent is made safe by the authority of the wise parent.

In these examples are illustrated two facets of the helping task for the person who works with young offenders. One facet is the supporting measures designed to give the youth genuine self-confidence, realistic help and broader perspective. The other facet is the wise use of authority to provide the protection the adolescent needs.

Probation officers, parole officers, police officers and others who work with young offenders are usually faced first with learning the wise use of authority. It is well for them to consider what this authority means and how it can be used constructively. The probation officer, for example, faced with a young offender just been placed on probation, has at hand "The conditions of probation" and his first task is to explain these conditions to the offender. Authority is often required to bring the offender within the range of help. The helping skill of the worker is of no value if the young offender is out of range of the worker's efforts.

Adolescents normally have trouble with authority, or in other words, they are in an authority-dependency conflict. Many young offenders are persons who are experiencing exaggerated difficulty in working out this normal conflict.

It is axiomatic that we must individualize offenders but the new worker must find some base upon which to operate. The police officer, the juvenile aid officer, probation or parole officer, social worker or settlement worker who faces the problems of these youths daily, must have some place to start.

One useful gambit for training is consideration of the meaning and effect of the use of authority. Words are like telephone wires. They facilitate communication but do not guarantee understanding. They have meaning only as they are understood by the speaker and the listener. Some words travel along the wires without interference. For example, everyone knows what a table is. Other words are beset with emotional static and what is clear to the speaker may mean something entirely different to the listener. "Authority" is one of these words. Those who use authority daily on their jobs rarely stop to think what it means. I recall asking a deputy warden of twenty-five years service in a prison to define it for me and he looked stunned. Authority is "institutionalized power". Power is a potential for physical action which those who possess it need not routinely use. A police official, for example, makes more arrests with words than he does with physical force. The power of a prison lies in its walls, locks and in the accessibility of the custodial force. Order in the prison, however, is usually maintained by authority rather than by force.

Why do people respond to the authority of the state, to the written directive, or to the verbal command? Their motives are frequently mixed but they can generally be classified in five categories.<sup>3</sup> Some respond in hope of reward. The student works with a long range view toward his degree but he may also hope for word of encouragement or praise from an instructor. Fear of punishment is another motive which at times moves us all. The young child is protected from danger, not because he understands that chewing on electrical wire is dangerous, but because he knows that he has been spanked for doing it before. The fear of punishment is not an exclusively infantile motive. All of us internalize authority only to some degree. For example, I am reasonably

3. Samuel Meneher, "The Concept of Authority and Social Casework" Casework Papers. 1960. New York: F.S.A.A. 1960

sure that I would drive on the right side of the road whether there were any police force or not. On the other hand, I am not so sure that I would pay my income tax unless I was aware that certain sanctions were available to the Department of Internal Revenue for treatment of those who fail to file a return.

A third motive is the automatic or conditioned response to some instruction. Most people will automatically follow the directions of a traffic policeman because society has placed upon him the authority to direct traffic. In maintaining the order of an institution or of society, the trappings provided the person in authority make economical use of this conditioned response. The uniform of the police official, the white coat which identifies the hospital employee, the robe of the judge, the cassock of the clergyman, the insignia of rank worn by members of the armed forces, are all designations of the type of authority they possess and for the individual who has no particular conflict with authority, they make life easier. Some of you may have been in the armed forces. When you have lived in such a setting for a period of months you become accustomed to knowing a great deal about the role of every individual in uniform just by looking at him. You recognize not only a captain's bars but the insignia of the engineers. You see not only the stripes of the first sergeant but the number of hash marks on his sleeve. For many young offenders the trappings of authority are the insignia of the enemy. They have experienced primarily the authority of abuse and the permissiveness of neglect. Experience with a genuinely constructive authority is, therefore, a therapeutic experience in itself.

A fourth attitude toward authority lies in recognition of competence to help. People in the professions, that is, physicians, lawyers, psychologists, teachers, social workers, rely heavily on recognition of their competence in order to exercise their authority. The assumption, however, that people who

need help have enough trust to rely on competence is poorly based. Because many young offenders have been failed by persons in authority, their reaction is not one of trust, but of fear which tends to drive them away from the helping person. In order to make use of the authority of competence in the treatment of offenders, it is usually necessary that the competence be demonstrated. Perhaps the better established professions have an advantage over newer professions such as psychologists or social worker. Even the oldest and most respected professions, however, are sometimes in a position of having to call upon other kinds of motivation. For example, we expect physicians generally to exercise the authority of competence rather than of fear. A physician, however, who faces a diabetic who refuses to take insulin or follow his diet may at some time be faced with a decision to say in effect "You must follow my directions or you will die."

A fifth response to authority is that of identification with a person in authority. The adolescent in the process of identifying himself in the world around him is in a ready position to identify with the right or the wrong people. In the idealism of many adolescents, educators make effective use of the adolescent's need to identify himself occupationally by calling upon the heroes of science, of literature and of history. In the street riots and in the high crime rate among youthful offenders we see identification with those who would disturb the present order or lack of identification, a purposeless and angry striking out against the world in general.

What does all this mean for workers who deal with young offenders? They must understand the authority that they have, be comfortable with it and know how to use it effectively. I recall one prison guard who expressed surprise that one of the sergeants of the institution known as a severe disciplinarian, was named by many prisoners in a pre-release interview, as the person on the

staff who had helped them most. This is really not surprising. Many young offenders in our penal institutions have never had anyone sufficiently interested in them to bother providing them with discipline. This guard, while he insisted on rigid adherence to the institution regulations, was seen as the person interested enough to try to keep the inmates out of trouble. The lack of authority which many teenagers have experienced is as serious a form of neglect as abuse. In suburbia it may be "Here is \$10.00, take the money and get out of my hair". In the slum it is more likely to be "Just get out of the house and occupy yourself on the street". This is the same kind of thing but the former provides an easy form of rationalization for parents.

This brings us directly to the question of the worker's relationship to the parents of young offenders. Indeed, I have just described neglectful parents with judgment-laden words with the needs of the offender as my focus and without adverting to the problems of parents. This is a trap which constantly endangers effective work with young offenders. The worker who tries to supplant parents rather than to supplement their efforts finds himself in an untenable position and tends to subject the offender to a repetition of feeling rejected by adults.

How directly the worker must get involved with parents depends upon the offender's life situation. If the offender lives in the parents' home, the cooperation of the parents is essential. The worker may be a scapegoat in a parent-child conflict, but should not get in the position of aggravating conflict by taking sides.

Whether parents are physically present, at great distance or for that matter dead, they are likely to loom large in the treatment process. The worker can derive his methods in helping the young offender achieve peaceful separation from parents by considering the normal emancipation process. When

early parent-child relationships are sound, the child views his parents first as God-like creatures who are omniscient and omnipotent. As the child learns the parents' human limitations, he goes through a phase of seeing parents as aliens of another generation who cannot understand and cannot help. When the emotional fogs of adolescence begin to lift, the child begins to see parents for what they are, - people with limitations and strengths. If the relationship has been sound, the adolescent maintains a pleasant feeling toward parents and thus can move away from them with reasonable comfort.

The young offender, even if he has moved out of the parents' home, is often still in the psychological process of wrestling with mixed feelings about parents. He yearns for independence but goes back again and again to try to work through his anger at his parents and at the world. Paradoxically, therefore, one way of helping the youth achieve independence in a constructive way is to help him renew or at least review his ties to parents, to help him see parents in a different perspective. For example, the youth who has known an abusive alcoholic father may be helped to grow emotionally if he can also see his father as an unhappy person who has made his family suffer because of his own discomfort in life. The youth who depreciates the failure of an immigrant mother to adapt to life in this country, can be helped toward maturity by an appreciation of the culture the mother represents. The clock cannot be turned back to correct the past, but offenders can be helped to perceive differently and to feel better about it. The healthy push toward maturity can be supported by the worker who can free a young offender from the manacles which tie him to an unhappy past.

To choose the kind of limits and provide the guidance which young offenders need without supplanting parents is not easy, but the concern of the official for the offender is often more important than the style. A young

probation officer was working with a nineteen year old offender convicted of car theft. As a condition of probation the court had specified that the offender must either attend school or be employed. As soon as he was placed under supervision the probation officer started to work on this problem. It was apparent the youth was not interested in further schooling at the time. Finding employment was difficult not only because he lacked skill but because he had suffered since childhood from chronic asthma. According to his physician the asthma was of a fairly severe nature and it was advisable for him to avoid employment which would expose him to extreme temperatures or to dust. The parents had been very permissive for this reason. For several weeks the probation reports contained the offender's statements of unsuccessful efforts to obtain employment. The probation officer referred the youth to a state vocational rehabilitation service but he failed to keep the appointment saying he was sure that he could get work. The probation officer resorted to the device of instructing the offender to keep a notebook with the list of places he had contacted for work during the week. Each week when he reported he forgot his notebook. Finally the supervisor suggested to the probation officer that it was time to face the offender with the possibility of revocation unless he met the conditions of his probation. The young probation officer was somewhat hesitant. He felt that he had developed a fairly good relationship with the probationer who had at least kept out of trouble during the two months that he had been under supervision. At the direction of the supervisor the officer faced the probationer with the fact that he had not kept his notebook as required and indeed he probably had none. He then faced the offender with his alternatives. He emphasized that the probationer had a choice to make: (1) find employment, (2) seek the help of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in view of his asthma condition, or (3) return to court for violation of probation.

The young probation officer came out of the interview relieved and surprised. The probationer had readily admitted that he had ignored the officer's instructions with regard to keeping a record of his search for work and indeed he had done very little searching because he felt he really had nothing to offer an employer. He didn't really understand the vocational rehabilitation service and he had regarded the referral merely as a suggestion. The offender seemed relieved that the issue had been faced. Within a week he made an appointment to apply for vocational rehabilitation and shortly thereafter, he kept his appointment.

Certainly the study, understanding and use of authority is not the whole answer for people who work with young offenders. It is a good starting point. Workers are often uncertain, fearful, inconsistent or unknowingly punitive in using the authority they possess. It may not be the most convenient place to start. Those who deal with human problems should understand human behavior. The most obvious method of studying behavior is to review development from infancy to old age. The experience of the infant during his first six months does indeed have reference to the reaction of the adolescent. However, when the worker has greatest need for immediate help in doing his job and feels the pressure of his load, it is hard for him to become interested in the study of infants.

The study of authority can also be the gambit for learning techniques of interviewing and the use of relationship. Learners can gain an understanding of the difference between an authoritarian attitude and the constructive use of authority in the management of their relationships.

The difference between a constructive authority and authoritarianism lies in its purpose. The person who is authoritarian works for his own ends. The person who exercised authority constructively uses it for the benefit of the

person he is trying to help. The style of the social worker and the psychologist may be different from the style of the police official or the prison guard. The latter have the primary responsibility of maintaining order so that treatment can take place. Without this order the psychologist and the social worker could not function. On the other hand, the work of the police official and the prison guard becomes easier if treatment personnel are successful. There is a vicious circle in the reaction of the young offender to misdirected or inconsistent authoritarianism - hostility, aggression, punishment and hostility. It is a responsibility of those who work with young offenders to change this vicious circle into a benign spiral - hostility, acceptance, understanding, achievement of identification by the individual and finally some order in his life and greater order in the community.

12/9/64  
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